

# The Pharisee & The Prostitute

## You Asked For It, Part 8

*Luke 7:36-50*

I have recently finished a book by a pastor who served for several years as an award winning journalist. On one occasion, he was doing a newspaper story on heroin addiction and was asked to profile a girl in their city named Mickey. Mickey was a 19 year-old heroin addict who sold her body for packets of black tar Mexican heroin – one of the most addictive narcotics on the planet. John writes that he met Mickey and they walked to a fast food hamburger place nearby where she sat in the booth, shivering and squinting through her steel blue eyes. We talked about her life – a life where she was trapped.

She had grown up in a wealthy family, loved teddy bears as a young girl and hoped to become a lawyer one day. While in high school, after fooling around with marijuana and cocaine, she tried heroin. Her first time, was shooting up in a bathroom stall at a Barnes and Noble. It was the worst drug experience she'd ever had, but the next day, she had to have some more.

From that moment on, she was enslaved. The past years had been tragic; the needle marks on her arms and neck were tragic; her living conditions were tragic; her emaciated body and her life were tragic.

But the most tragic moment came toward the end of my time interviewing her. As a believer I had been working behind the scenes to arrange for serious, committed help. Now, after writing her story, I had found one of the best addiction recovery centers in the state – it was expensive, but they had agreed to take Mickey on – for free. That night, all the details had been arranged.

Through the course of our interviews, Mickey had often told me that she wanted so desperately to be free from heroin, from her prostitution, from the abusive streets, from the enslavements of her life. And now she had the chance – I told her what had been arranged . . . the car was actually waiting there for her at the curb.

But to our great sadness and surprise, Mickey chose to keep her life as it was – unsure of what it might mean for her to leave everything she knew

behind – afraid of what it might mean to start all over and face life without drugs.<sup>i</sup>

Mickey said no.

I also read recently of another counselor for teenagers who wrote that these stories of hopelessness and despair don't just live in the ghetto – they are in our neighborhoods. The counselor wrote, "A teenage girl from the suburbs – from a nice family and a manicured lawn – came to me and in our session together, she pulled back her sleeve to show me where she had taken a razor blade and cut into her forearm the word – *empty*."<sup>ii</sup>

Empty.

Both of these young women believed they were beyond redemption . . . beyond hope . . . certainly, beyond forgiveness.

But they weren't . . . in fact, no one is.

One of the most dramatic encounters of grace and forgiveness takes place between Jesus, a Pharisee and a prostitute.

And as the Lord so often does, he teaches us by contrasting two lives that intersect in the most unexpected circumstances.

It takes place in Luke chapter 7, where the lives of an upstanding Pharisee and a notorious prostitute intersect.

The word, "empty" fits them both . . . she effectively has it written on her body; the Pharisee has it written on his heart.

I'll tell you ahead of time, by the end of this encounter, this prostitute will effectively step into the waiting automobile, choosing a new life in Christ – but Simon the Pharisee will choose to keep his old life just like it was, without Christ.

***Luke chapter 7 and verse 36*** informs us that ***one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.***

Down in ***verse 40*** we learn that this Pharisee's name was Simon.

And you need to keep in mind that Jesus and the Pharisees weren't exactly bosom buddies.

No group of men was more consistently hostile to Jesus than the Pharisees.<sup>iii</sup>

Luke mentions the Pharisees 28 times in his Gospel account and every time he does they are in some kind of dispute or hostile frame of mind toward the Lord.

They will eventually lead the chant to crucify the Savior.

Simon is inviting Jesus over, not because he's considering becoming a disciple – he's invited Jesus over to find something to use against Him – something to prove that Jesus really isn't a prophet after all.

And in this encounter, he will find evidence that he thinks will prove that Jesus is an imposter – at least, at first.

Now, before I get too far ahead of the story, Simon's hostile, unkind view toward Jesus is discovered by what's *missing* here in this paragraph.

You'll notice in verse 36 that Jesus went immediately from the front door to reclining at the table.

Now in these days, a large home, like Simon's would have a courtyard with rooms surrounding it and opening onto it – one of them being a dining room. Evening meals were often public affairs, doors were left wide open, and those not invited to eat could wander in to take part in lively conversations.<sup>iv</sup>

Especially when a well-known Rabbi was an invited guest.

And when that invited guest entered the house, the host would place his hand on their shoulder and give him what they called the kiss of peace – a kiss on both cheeks – especially for such an honored guest.<sup>v</sup>

This is still being done in many parts of the world, not just the Middle East.

As you know, Marsha and I recently traveled to Switzerland where we discovered that everyone in the church greeted each other with a kiss in the air next to each cheek; and then more recently we traveled to South America where the entire church did the same.

I was so impressed by this sweet hospitality – obviously an application of Paul's exhortation to greet one another with a holy kiss – that I brought it back here and one Sunday morning suggested that we do the same as the service began.

It didn't go over very well, did it?

I almost lost my job.

If you think that's a tough assignment for greeting one another, one of our missionaries several years ago invited me to Russia. He said, "Now,

Stephen, you need to know that if you come, the older men in these villages and towns still greet one another with a kiss. I said, "No problem." He said, "It's on the lips . . . shaggy beards and all;" just a quick smack on the lips. I asked, what about the women?" He said, "No, just the men do this." I said, "I'm not coming to Russia!"

I've never been more happy with a handshake!

Well, you'll notice in this text that there's no greeting or kiss of peace here.

And, frankly, you might not think anything about it, because it's often left out of the narratives.

But a more obvious snub here in Simon's house, is that the host would always have a servant read to unlace their sandals and pour cool water over their feet as they prepare to recline on their left elbow with their feet pointing away from them as they eat their dinner.

Simon offers none of this to the Lord.

One more thing; if a host was capable financially – and Simon would have been – each guest would have had a small drop of perfume or oil placed on their head – which provided soothing, aroma for the weary guest – and scented the entire dining room.<sup>vi</sup>

None of this is offered to Jesus. He is openly – and obviously snubbed. He's treated with civil, yet cold disdain . . . and Jesus, by the way, notices it, but says nothing – at least not yet.

Now dinner was, for the most part over, when someone else – someone obviously unwanted – slips into the crowded dining room.

Notice *verse 37. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner.*

The word Luke uses for sinner is a word that refers to someone devoted to sin – that is, someone who makes sin their business.<sup>vii</sup>

In other words, this woman is a prostitute.

In fact, she was a well-known prostitute – so well known to Simon and the others that they knew who she was without an introduction – as we'll find out in a moment.

But this woman, knowing that eyebrows will be raised and tension will skyrocket with her daring arrival – she comes to that dining room anyway, because she is overwhelmed with love for Christ.

If you put the Gospel accounts together, just prior to this encounter, Jesus has preached, "***If you are weary and heavy laden, come to Me – believe in me – and I will give you rest . . . my yoke is easy and my burden is light.***" (Matthew 11)

She has heard His message – and perhaps other messages – but that one struck her – she was weary

and worn . . . enslaved to a devotion of a sinful existence . . . life was nothing but guilt and sorrow and abandonment and belittling.

One word summed up her life – ‘empty’!

It might as well been written on her arms for everyone to see. But His words changed her life.

She’s comes here ready to declare her belief and her allegiance to Him . . . and of all places, in the home of someone who represented everything she wasn’t.

The most uninviting home in the city.

Notice, *verse 37 that she brought with her an alabaster vial of perfume.*

These small vials typically hung around a woman’s neck.<sup>viii</sup>

Small vials with perfume which, in this woman’s case, would have been a vital part of her trade so that she could constantly stay perfumed for the next customer.

She will effectively give that up for good.

So there she stands, by Jesus’ feet . . . and then everything sort of falls apart and she begins to cry.

She’s standing behind Him at His feet – *verse 38 tells us*, and she begins to weep – and her tears splash down on Jesus’ dusty, dirty feet – and she doesn’t have a towel and now what does she do but kneel down by his feet and loosen her long hair and use her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus.<sup>ix</sup>

And then she’s so overwhelmed with joy and sheer reverence that she kisses his feet as she perfumes them with her vial of costly perfume.

We know from history that in this culture students or disciples kissed the hands of their teachers in greeting; if they were equals they would kiss on the cheek.<sup>x</sup>

However, in this case, the woman was placing herself as the lowest of society – as an adoring, grateful, worshipping, slave.

These are tears of repentance and joy – she’s simply overwhelmed with the fact that her empty life has been changed by this Man!

The imperfect tense is used for all these verbs so that we see her continuing to wipe her tears which continue to flow and continuing to kiss his feet and continuing to anoint his feet with her perfume.<sup>xi</sup>

You can imagine dinner just kind of shut down – no one’s eating or talking or moving. All you hear in that room are the sobs and sniffles of a woman whose emptiness is evaporating.

Martin Luther the Reformer, commented on this text saying that tears are water directly from the heart. These are tears of gratitude bathing the Lord’s

feet as she sobs uncontrollably, lost in godly sorrow; lost in wonder; lost in genuine love and praise.<sup>xii</sup>

She’s the only one in there who gets who Jesus is!

Now for years, traditional commentary has viewed her actions as suggestive, or even off-color – that any married woman who let down her hair in the presence of anyone but her husband was considered suggestive at best, immoral at worst.

More recent research and discoveries have shown this is not true in cases of worship or deep respect.

In fact, one New Testament scholar pointed out illustrations in pagan culture where women would kneel at the feet of their idol – kissing the statues fee, and – get this – letting down their hair as a symbol of transparent humility and thankful veneration.<sup>xiii</sup>

So what’s happening here in Simon’s house is nothing less than spontaneous, unguarded, unplanned, emotional, joyful worship.

One author put it this way: Her hair was her womanly glory, but she loosed it to wipe the dirt from her Savior’s feet; her beauty was devoted to Him and His glory was her first priority.<sup>xiv</sup>

Listen, she has made her decision . . . “I am giving my life to Jesus – and I really don’t need this vial of perfume anymore.

Now Simon the Pharisee is livid . . . he’s outraged! He doesn’t care about conversions . . . he doesn’t care about people who are empty for that matter . . . he only cares about appearances and traditions and a reputations.

Notice *verse 39. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.”*

You see, Simon invited Jesus to his home to test him . . . to check Him out . . .

To see if he could discover any evidence that Jesus was only a pretender . . .<sup>xv</sup>

He’s thinking to himself, if Jesus were a true prophet of God, He’d be able to know who this woman was and that she was in the very act of ceremonially defiling Him by touching Him.

Simon has all the evidence he needs – Jesus can’t even spot a *notorious* sinner – some prophet He is . . . wait’ll the other Pharisees hear about this one!

At this point, Jesus is ready to really shake things up – *verse 40. Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he replied, “Say it, Teacher.”*

You need to understand that this phrase in the Middle East translated here – “***I have something to say to you***” – is an expression used to introduce a blunt speech the listener may not want to hear.”<sup>xvi</sup>

This is your boss calling you into his office and saying, “Sit down, I’ve got something to tell you.”

Or the doctor calling and saying, “We got your test results back and there’s something I need to tell you.”

This was my mother – when I was growing up. You remember? – the woman who didn’t spank me as much as I deserved – this is her saying, “Stephen come down to the kitchen, there’s something I need to tell you.” I’ll bet.

Men, this is your wife saying, “Honey, we need to talk.” That doesn’t mean *you’re* going to talk . . . you’re not going to say a word.

We’d better get back to the text.

***Verse 41. Jesus begins a parable, “A moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.***

In other words, one guy owed 500 days labor – almost 2 years of his salary, assuming he didn’t work on the Sabbath – and the other guy owed 2 months-worth of salary.

Owing some guy two months of your salary is pretty steep – owing some guy 2 years of your salary is desperately steep.

The point in this parable is that they’re both in a lot of trouble – ***verse 42*** – because ***both of them were unable to pay, and he graciously forgave them both. So . . . and here’s the question for the week from Jesus . . . So which of them will love him more?”***

In other words, “Who will be the most grateful for having their debt erased?”

You’ll notice that Simon doesn’t want to commit here to a rather obvious question and an even more obvious application. He knows he and the prostitute are being compared – and in this parable, she’s the big sinner and he’s the little sinner, but they’re both bankrupt.

But now he’s stuck.

But he doesn’t want to flunk the quiz in front of his friends.

So he dodges the question as much as he can and simply says, in ***verse 43***, “***I suppose – well I suppose – the one whom he forgave more.***” ***And Jesus said, “You have judged correctly.”***

But He’s not finished. Oh my, here it comes. ***44. Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?”***

Now this question is dripping with holy sarcasm. See her? Simon saw her the moment she walked into the dining room.

Simon knows who she is . . . which begs another question or two that we don’t have time to deal with.

***Verse 44. Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. 46. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. 47. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven her, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.***

The point Jesus is making here is if you have a little sin or a lot of sin, you’re in the same place as the next guy – you’re bankrupt and in desperate need of grace and forgiveness.

In the eyes of God, prostitution isn’t more sinful than pride.

Sin is sin.

So both Simon and the prostitute are both bankrupted by sin . . . they’re both in danger of being thrown into debtors prison – meaning judgment . . . they’re both at the mercy of their lender – meaning God . . . they are both the recipients of grace as their debts are forgiven – if they will believe in Him.

The really convicting point of this parable is not the amount of sin, but the awareness of sin.<sup>xvii</sup>

She’s come into this room knowing that her life has been one sinful mess; Simon’s sitting there thinking what a great guy he is.

And he’s not too happy with being lumped into this parable with the prostitute.

Now watch what happens in ***verse 48***. ***Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins have been forgiven.” (that did it) 49. Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves “Who is this man who even forgives sins.”***

In other words, she had believed in the message of Jesus before she’d ever shown up that night – and now Jesus confirms that she is indeed forgiven.

And her loving actions were a demonstration that she was now openly following Jesus, her Redeemer.

And I got to tell you, this encounter wasn’t so much for Simon as much as it was for this anonymous harlot.

Jesus came to Simon's house that night so that He could rebuke Simon, certainly and his religious community; but He came to meet her – and allow her to meet Him.

He looks at her and effectively says in *verse 50*, ***“Your faith saved you.*** Notice, He didn't say, you're perfume saved you; your tears saved you; your humility in wiping my feet with your hair like a slave saved you – no, you're faith in Me saved you . . . and now, you've never known anything out there on the street even remotely looking like peace – but now . . . literally, ***go into peace.***

This is the gospel . . . and for everyone who believes in Him, that word, carved into your body – the word 'empty' – is forever replaced with the word, "Forgiven".

And the greater your awareness of how much Jesus forgave you and continues to forgive you, the greater your desire to praise Him . . . the greater your willingness to be a slave at His feet . . . the greater your eagerness to lay your glory in the dust and lift up His glory.

So never get too far beyond the awareness of your great sinfulness – and the greatness of His grace.

And for his woman, there was one more treasure for her; that packed dinner party, at the home of a well-known Pharisee, filled with people who were community leaders and religious leaders – that dinner party became the perfect place for Jesus to

effectively announce to the entire city – in one fell swoop – this notorious prostitute is from henceforth a new woman.

A forgiven woman . . . an accepted woman . . . and if the rest of you guys would like to join her . . . I want you to know that her future is ***peace*** . . . peace . . . she was empty, but now she's accepted – forgiven.

I'll never forget in my office some time ago, meeting with a woman who had questions about the gospel. She'd been faithfully committed to her religious system – merit based religion – do the best you can and hope for the best kind of religion. I shared with her from the scriptures that Jesus paid it all . . . ***that He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy (Titus 3:5)***

And it dawned on this middle-aged woman – her eyes were opened to the truth – and she put her hands to her mouth and tears began to stream down her cheeks and she kept saying, "I can't believe it . . . it's free . . . it's free."

Lenski, the brilliant Greek Scholar ended his commentary on this passage by saying, "For myself, I want no more than what Jesus gave this woman – then he quoted in Greek what Jesus effectively said:

*Your sins are forgiven . . .  
Your faith has saved you . . .  
Now go, into peace, forever.* <sup>xviii</sup>

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/14/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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ii Madeline Levine, [The Price of Privilege](#) (Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 3  
iii John Phillips, [Exploring the Gospel of Luke](#) (Kregel, 2005), p. 127  
iv Adapted from David E. Garland, [Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2011), p. 324  
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vi Ibid  
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xv Lenski, p. 427

xvi Garland, p. 327

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xviii Lenski, p. 438